

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 MOSCOW 13204 01 OF 02 291751Z

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EURE-00 SAJ-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07

H-03 INR-11 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01

SP-03 SS-20 USIA-15 OMB-01 NIC-01 DRC-01 EB-11 FRB-03

CIEP-03 /122 W

----- 098292

P R 291624Z AUG 74

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2034

INFO AMEMBASSY BELGRADE

USMISSION BERLIN

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

AMCONSUL LENINGRAD

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AMEMBASSY SOFIA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 13204

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR

SUBJECT: POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN THE USSR

1. THE FOLLOWING ASSESSMENT OF THE SOVIET POLITICAL
SUCCESSION PROBLEM MAY SERVE AS PART OF THE EMBASSY'S
AJGUST TRENDS REPORT (OTHER ITEMS HAVE BEEN SENT SEPTTEL).

2. SUMMARY. THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP IS NOW CONSIDERING
REVAMPING ITS ECONOMIC ADMINISTRATION, BUT ITS LEISURELY
PACE MAKES IT APPEAR THAT THE LEADERS DO NOT FEEL
PRESSED BY TIME. ACTUALLY THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP PROBABLY
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PAGE 02 MOSCOW 13204 01 OF 02 291751Z

HAS ONLY A FEW YEARS OF COMMAND LEFT, AND BREZHNEV LOOKS

LIKE THE FIRST ONE TO SUCCUMB TO PHYSICAL INFIRMITIES. THE MOST LIKELY IMMEDIATE REACTION FOLLOWING BREZHNEV'S DEPARTURE WOULD BE A PERIOD OF LEADERSHIP OF A MORE PURELY COLLECTIVE KIND. PARTY SECRETARY KIRILENKO APPEARS TO BE IN THE BEST POSITION EVENTUALLY TO SECURE THE TOP PARTY POST IF ONLY FOR A BRIEF PERIOD, CONSIDERING HIS AGE. END SUMMARY.

3. THE SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IS NOW IN A PERIOD OF GESTATION OF UNPREDICTABLE DURATION. THE KEY PROBLEMS DEMANDING DECISION WERE OUTLINED BY BREZHNEV AT THE DECEMBER 1973 CPSU PLENUM; WHILE SOME OF THE SHOWIER SET-PIECES SUCH AS THE BAYKAL-AMUR RAILWAY AND NONCHERNOZEM RECLAMATION PROJECT HAVE BEEN LAUNCHED, PROPOSALS FOR REVAMPING THE ECONOMIC ADMINISTRATION HAVE BOGGED DOWN AMONG CONFLICTING INTERESTS.

4. WHILE THE DEBATES ARE PROCEEDING AND THE SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ACTS AS THOUGH IT HAD A WORLD OF TIME AT ITS DISPOSAL, A QUICK GLANCE SHOWS THAT THIS IS DEFINITELY NOT THE CASE FOR THE SENIOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP. THE FIVE TOP-RANKING POLITICAL LEADERS--BREZHNEV, PODGORNYY, KOSYGIN, SUSLOV, AND KIRILENKO--AVERAGE A SHADE LESS THAN 70 YEARS OF AGE. THE 16 FULL MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO AVERAGE 64-PLUS YEARS; THE 7 CANDIDATE MEMBERS AVERAGE ALMOST 59 1/2 YEARS; AND THE 10 MEMBERS OF THE SECRETARIAT AVERAGE 61-PLUS YEARS. BUT THE BASIC FACT IS THAT THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP HAS FEW YEARS LEFT TO RULE.

5. BREZHNEV WILL BE 69 YEARS OLD IN DECEMBER AND IS AFFLICTED WITH ARTERIOSCLEROSIS, A DISEASE WHICH CAN BE TREATED BUT NOT CURED. HIS PUBLIC PERFORMANCES DURING THE LAST YEAR INDICATE THAT HIS ENERGY MUST BE HUSBANDED CAREFULLY; HE RECOVERS EACH DAY BUT SOMETIMES APPEARS TO RUN DOWN BEFORE THE END OF A DAY OF EXHAUSTING PUBLIC ACTIVITIES. PODGORNYY AND KOSYGIN ARE OLDER THAN BREZHNEV BUT APPEAR TO BE IN BETTER CONDITION. KIRILENKO, ALMOST 69, APPEARS TO BE IN SATISFACTORY HEALTH, BUT SUSLOV AT 72 IS KNOWN TO HAVE HAD PROBLEMS ALTHOUGH HE PERFORMS IN PUBLIC ABLY IF INFREQUENTLY.

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PAGE 03 MOSCOW 13204 01 OF 02 291751Z

6. BREZHNEV IS BOTH THE MOST IMPORTANT SOVIET POLITICAL LEADER AND ALSO THE ONE MOST LIKELY TO BE INCAPACITATED WITHIN THE FAIRLY NEAR TERM--2-3 YEARS. THERE IS NO CONSTITUTIONAL PROCEDURE FOR THE POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN THE PARTY, AND THE CURRENT POLITICAL LEADERS DO NOT APPEAR TO BE GROOMING A YOUNGER GENERATION OF POLITICAL SUCCESSORS. THE OUTLOOK IS FOR AN INITIAL PERIOD OF POLITICAL COLLECTIVITY OF A PURER CHARACTER FOLLOWING THE INCAPACITATION

OF BREZHNEV WHICH WOULD THEN BE SUCCEEDED BY POLITICAL JOCKEYING SIMILAR TO THAT WHICH FOLLOWED THE DISAPPEARANCE FROM SUPREME POWER OF LENIN, STALIN, AND KHRUSHCHEV.

7. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEPARTURE OF BREZHNEV WILL HAVE A DETERMINING EFFECT UPON THE SCENARIO AND FORTUNES OF THE CHIEF ACTORS. FOR INSTANCE, IF THE POLITICAL CHANGEOVER OCCURS IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE AND IN THE CURRENT CALM INTERNAL AND RELATIVELY FAVORABLE EXTERNAL POSITION OF THE SOVIET UNION, THE FORCES OF CONTINUITY REPRESENTED BY THE EXISTING POLITICAL LEADERS WOULD PROBABLY PREVAIL. THIS SUGGESTS THAT THE BREZHNEV GROUPING IN THE POLITBURO MIGHT BE ABLE TO ADVANCE A.P. KIRILENKO TO THE TOP JOB DESPITE HIS AGE. KIRILENKO THIS YEAR AS IN THE PAST FILLS IN FOR BREZHNEV IN THE SECRETARIAT WHILE BREZHNEV IS ON VACATION OR TRAVELLING. KIRILENKO ALSO HAS A RECORD OF PARTY MANAGEMENT IN THE HEAVY INDUSTRIAL AREAS OF THE RSFSR AND IS CLEARLY WELL PLACED IN TERMS OF PARTY PRIORITIES. WERE HE TO SUCCEED TO TOP POWER, PROSPECTS PRESUMABLY WOULD STAY BRIGHT FOR BREZHNEV'S OTHER HAND-PICKED CHOICES.

8. THE ACTIVITIES RECENTLY AND THE FRONT-PAGE PUBLICITY ACCORDED TO PARTY SECRETARY KULAKOV SUGGEST THAT HE IS ONE OF THE RISING POLITICAL STARS; HE REPORTS ON AGRICULTURE TO BREZHNEV AND CLEARLY IS ON GOOD TERMS WITH HIM. AT THE SAME TIME, HIS FORMER OPPOSITE NUMBER IN THE GOVERNMENT, DMITRIY POLYANSKIY, HAS LOST GROUND IN THE POLITICAL BATTLE FOR STATUS.

9. THERE ARE SOME CURRENT DISTURBING NOTES FOR THE BREZHNEV COTERIE. KAZAKH POLITICAL LEADER KUNAYEV WAS ILL LAST SPRING ALTHOUGH HE TURNED UP BRIEFLY IN LATE JULY IN MOSCOW
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 MOSCOW 13204 01 OF 02 291751Z

FOR THE SUPREME SOVIET; HE HAS FAILED TO ATTEND A PARTY PLENUM AND SUPREME SOVIET SESSION IN KAZAKHSTAN IN AUGUST AND PROBABLY IS CONTINUING HIS RECUPERATION. BREZHNEV'S LONG-TIME CRONY FROM THE UKRAINE, V. V. SHCHERBITSKIY, HAS COME IN FOR SOME INDIRECT CRITICISM LATELY IN SOME REPROACHES FROM THE CPSU CENTRAL COMMITTEE OVER THE POOR STATE OF LOCAL INDUSTRY AND CONSUMER SERVICES IN THE UKRAINE.

10. THERE IS ALSO A FUTURE SUCCESSION PROBLEM WITHIN THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT ALTHOUGH A CANDIDATE FOR THE PREMIERSHIP IS CLEARLY VISIBLE. SINCE THE DEMOTION OF DMITRIY POLYANSKIY, ONLY K. T. MAZUROV SEEMS TO BE INSTITUTIONALLY WELL PLACED TO SUCCEED KOSYGIN. MAZUROV HAS A PARTY RECORD FROM HIS BELORUSSIAN DAYS BUT SEEMS

TO TAKE A SPECIAL INTEREST IN LIGHT INDUSTRY AND CONSUMER
GOODS, JUDGING FROM HIS PUBLIC ACTIVITIES. HOWEVER,
THIS MAY BE ONLY A RESULT OF KOSYGIN'S OVERALL RESPONSIBILITY
FOR THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC PICTURE. SHOULD MAZUROV MOVE
UP, NO GREAT POLICY CHANGES SHOULD BE EXPECTED IMMEDIATELY.

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PAGE 01 MOSCOW 13204 02 OF 02 291759Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MOSCOW 13204

11. THE POINT WAS RECENTLY MADE BY THE BRITISH ANALYST
ROBERT CONQUEST THAT THE SOVIETS ARE NOT TRAINING A YOUNGER
GENERATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS, AND THAT THE SUPREME
POLITICAL PRIZE MAY BE WON EVENTUALLY BY SOME UNKNOWN
FIGURE FROM THE PROVINCES. CONQUEST CONCLUDES THAT A GREAT
DANGER STEMS FROM THIS POSSIBILITY SINCE THE NEW LEADER
WILL BE QUITE UNSKILLED IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

AFFAIRS. THIS IS A GOOD POINT, AND THE ONLY PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE IS THAT SOMEONE FROM AMONG THE PRESENT LEADERSHIP PICK UP THE REINS WHEN THE PRESENT SENIORS EXIT.

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PAGE 02 MOSCOW 13204 02 OF 02 291759Z

12. THERE ARE TWO POLITICAL HOPEFULS STILL ON THE POLITBURO WHOSE CAREERS HAVE ALREADY PEAKED BUT WHO ARE OBVIOUSLY HOPING THAT THEIR RELATIVE YOUTH MAY GIVE THEM A SECOND CHANCE. BOTH SHELEPIN AND POLYANSKIY HAVE SUFFERED DEMOTIONS AND NOW DISCHARGE LESS RESPONSIBLE DUTIES THAN IN THE PAST. THEIR PROBLEM IS WHETHER OR NOT THEY CAN REBUILD A POLITICAL BASE IN THEIR CURRENT POSTS AGAINST FUTURE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES.

13. THE ROLES PLAYED BY THE REMAINING FOUR SENIOR LEADERS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING BREZHNEV'S INCAPACITATION WILL BE DECISIVE, AT LEAST FOR THE SHORT TERM. SINCE THEY ALL HAVE DISPARATE POWER BASES AND AMBITIONS, IT SEEMS LOGICAL FOR THEM TO AGREE ON AN INTERREGNUM BASED ON POLITICAL COLLECTIVITY RATHER THAN NAME ONE OF THEIR NUMBER AS THE TOP LEADER AT ONCE. HOWEVER, ONLY SUSLOV AND KIRILENKO OF THE SENIORS HAVE INTACT BASES OF POLITICAL POWER. SUSLOV HAS BEEN THE KINGMAKER RATHER THAN ASPIRANT FOR TOP POWER AND AT 72-PLUS PROBABLY WOULD HOPE ONLY FOR A CONTINUATION OF HIS PRESENT STATUS. PODGORNYY'S POLITICAL BASE IN KHARK'OV WAS SEVERELY CRIPPLED BY BREZHNEV IN 1965 AND NOW IS JUST ANOTHER OF THE REGIONAL POLITICAL MACHINES IN THE UKRAINE.

14. IF AN INTERREGNUM LEADERSHIP IS HEADED BY THE SURVIVING SENIORS, IT SEEMS MOST LIKELY THAT CURRENT INTERNAL POLICIES WILL PREVAIL. THE PARTY IS DETERMINED TO RETAIN ITS MONOPOLY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTROLS, BUT MUST STRIKE A BALANCE WITH THE NEED TO IMPROVE ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND TO RAISE THE STANDARD OF LIVING ALBEIT GRADUALLY. FOREIGN POLICY WILL BE SUBJECT TO THE SAME PRESSURES AND CONSTRAINTS NOW IN OPERATION, BUT THE MAN MOST CLEARLY IDENTIFIED WITH THE PROGRAM OF REDUCTION OF TENSIONS WITH THE U.S. WILL BE ABSENT FROM THE SCENE. A SLOWING OF THE PACE OF DETENTE WOULD BE A POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCE OF BREZHNEV'S DEPARTURE, BUT IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT A MAJOR TURNABOUT WOULD BE ADOPTED BY A POLITBURO STAFFED PREDOMINANTLY WITH THE PRESENT MEMBERSHIP.

15. ALL OF THE ABOVE SUPPOSITIONS ARE BASED ON A
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PAGE 03 MOSCOW 13204 02 OF 02 291759Z

TRANSITION OCCURRING IN AN ORDERLY DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT.
IF SEVERE ECONOMIC DISLOCATIONS AT HOME SHOULD FORCE
TOP-LEVEL LEADERSHIP CHANGES OR SHOULD CATASTROPHE ABROAD
COMPEL THE SOVIETS TO REGROUP THEIR LEADERS, THE ATTENDANT
CIRCUMSTANCES WOULD PREDOMINATE AND FORCE THE CHOICES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, POLITICAL SITUATION, POLITICAL LEADERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 29 AUG 1974
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: garlanwa
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974MOSCOW13204
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D740239-1141
From: MOSCOW
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t1974088/aaaaaghe.tel
Line Count: 287
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: garlanwa
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 APR 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <29 APR 2002 by boyleja>; APPROVED <01 JUL 2002 by garlanwa>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN THE USSR
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR
To: n/a
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005